

Healthy Food Choices Impact Learning

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As kids head back to school this month, what they eat for breakfast, lunch and snacks is vital. Whether they take their lunch to school or eat in the school cafeteria, making healthy food choices is critical to their growth and development.

Multiple studies show that proper nutrition improves a child's ability to succeed at school, increases energy, improves performance, reduces absenteeism, improves emotional functioning, leads to improved test scores, and results in a host of other positive outcomes.

Feeding your children a healthy breakfast will ensure their day gets off to the best start. Choose foods with fiber and avoid sugar. Oatmeal, shredded wheat cereals, bananas or whole grain pancakes will help control your children's adrenaline levels and improve their day.

If you are packing lunches for school,

- Allow your children to help and encourage them to make healthy choices.
- Use unusual shapes, bright colors and interesting wrappings to make food fun.
- Add a note, message, small toy or surprise to each lunch box.

If your children eat lunch provided at school, encourage them to make healthy choices. Suggest they choose vegetables, fruits and whole grain bread over fried foods, salty foods and white bread. Encourage them to drink low-fat milk or water instead of fruit juice or soda.

Talk to your children's teachers about presenting nutrition information in class. Ask other parents to encourage their children to eat healthy as well. Make healthy eating the "popular" choice.

Encourage your teens to make good food decisions, too. At this age growth and change is happening so quickly that nutrient requirements increase. Adolescents need at least 1200 mg of calcium a day to develop strong bones, but most teens take in less than 1000 mg a day.

One of the most important things you can do is be a good role model.

- Make healthy menu choices.
- Make mealtime a fun, family event.
- Turn off the TV and get active with your children.
- Don't be too restrictive.
- Watch what your family drinks. Limit fruit juice to 12 oz. a day. Avoid soda and encourage low fat milk.
- Stay positive and take small steps together as a family.

If you encourage your children to establish healthy eating patterns now, they will be more likely to continue to make good choices as they grow older.

For more information, call the Springfield-Greene County Health Department at (417) 864-1658.